

Unveiling the Factors Influencing Negative Perceptions of Food Waste Among Young Professionals: a Global Comparative Study

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Abstract

Food waste represents a global challenge. According to FAO (2011), 1,300 million tons of food produced for human consumption are lost or wasted. In addition, the latest UNEP report (2021) estimates that 8-10% of global greenhouse gas emissions are associated with food waste. At the individual level, UNEP (2021) reported that 74 kg of food is wasted each year, of which less than a quarter of this wasted food would suffice to eliminate hunger (Al-Jawaldeh & Meyer, 2023). Notwithstanding the urgency of the challenge, according to recent research, there seems to be a disconnect between the actual attitudes toward solving the challenge and the increasing attention that has been received from both professionals in the food sector and the general public (Martin-Rios et al., 2018; Papargyropoulou et al., 2019). How food-related professionals make sense of this challenge's dimensions and act upon has started to be discussed. Yet, most studies are limited in their scope and impact, and the lack of sizable samples severely hinders their representativeness and application. This study aims to fill the black box of the relationship between pro-environmental behavior (PEB) and the negative attitude towards food waste (NAFW) by addressing the moderating role of food waste awareness. An online survey (N = 634) was conducted to collect primary data from young professionals in Asia, Europe, and North America. Responses were used to test if a) PEB has a positive relationship with NAFW, b) The relationship between PEB and NAFW is mediated by awareness of the consequences of food waste, and c) Young professionals' PEB, awareness of the consequences of food waste, and NAFW are associated with their region of origin, educational background, and participation in mandatory and voluntary sustainability training. Results revealed that PEB has a significant direct relationship with favourable attitudes against food waste. However, our findings also suggest that

when awareness is included in the analysis, PEB is not significantly correlated with NAFW. Findings also suggest that awareness of the magnitude of the challenge plays a key role in the development of attitudes with regard to food waste. Food waste awareness has a significant positive relationship with NAFW and in the case of young professionals, results show that those who were more aware of the consequences of food waste held stronger attitudes to limit food waste, making awareness of the consequences of food waste a significant predictor of the negatives attitudes towards it. Results revealed the cross-cultural sensitivity of individual behaviours towards the food waste challenge, respondents from European countries showed stronger NAFW compared to US and Asian nationals, yet those in food management-related careers did not exhibit stronger NAFW, shedding light on the limited role of educational background in NAFW. These results open new perspectives in food waste research that could yield fruitful future avenues. Future research could build on this study by exploring other antecedents of the attitudes and actual practices to minimize food waste.

Keywords: Food waste, attitudes, awareness, cross-cultural differences

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